

Cabin leases in Mineral King may fade into Sequoia history

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FRESNO — The Ansel Adams photograph of the hardware on out-houses near historic Mineral King cabins hints at the devotion to detail and preservation at the Sequoia National Park destination.

But, even though the many families who vacation in their beloved Mineral King cabins long have pursued preservation, photographs and memories soon may be all that remains of the 67 structures.

"Some families have been coming up here for six generations," said Three Rivers resident John Elliott, historian and Mineral King expert. "They're part of a landscape that needs to be preserved along with everything else in Mineral King."

But National Park Service officials say Congress has had something else in mind since 1978. The resulting tension could mean renewed legislative involvement with the storied Mineral King area.

"It's a beautiful place; that's what all the fighting is about," said Bill Tweed, Sequoia National Park's director of planning. "It's amazing how much politics can be involved in a small place."

Though Mineral King cabins date back to almost the turn of the century, the current conflict has its direct roots in a massive California wilderness bill approved by Congress in 1978.

One of the bill's smaller provisions transferred the 16,000-acre Mineral King Valley from U.S. Forest Service to National Park Service control. The transfer ended, once and for all, developers' dreams of building a Mineral King ski resort.

Mineral King Valley cabin users were among the staunchest advocates of providing Park Service protection for the 16,000-acre region. So they say it came as a shock to discover one tiny reference in the bill that restricted renewals of the cabin leases to the current permit holders.

Meaning, when a current permit holder dies, the cabin no longer could be used. In fact, because the park considers the cabin private property, officials could demand removal of the structure by the survivors.

Park officials, citing their responsibility to the general public, say that's a fair deal.

"We would put up with the cabins for a significant amount of time, but eventually they would go away," Tweed said, describing the provision. "We believe the law is just."

This is not a fight unique to Sequoia.

Park officials nationwide often consider private dwellings within park boundaries to be an impediment to good management. The private citizens tend to love their well-situated cabins. That's one of the reasons why Yosemite officials have had such a hard time with the Foresta area.

The permit holders for Mineral King cabins, proud of their fight to block the proposed Disney ski resort, don't think they should be at odds with the park.

"The majority of (the families) joined forces with the Sierra Club when they were talking about developing Mineral King," said Jim Ingram, whose family has used a cabin for many years. "We've been committed to conservation for a long time."

Ingram said the cabins are used only four months of the year because snowfall keeps the twisting Mineral King Road closed the rest of the time. For eight months of the year, the cabins remain untouched, he said.

The road, which has more than 600 curves, was cut for mining activities in the 1870s. It contributes to the character of the area and also should be protected, historian Elliott said.

Ruth Shepherd, whose Tulare County schoolteacher father built his Mineral King cabin in about 1916, said the original wilderness legislation in the 1970s would have protected the cabins.

It was only at the last minute, she says, that "Park Service boilerplate language" was substituted that allowed only the current generation of permit holders to keep their cabins.

Had they known of the provision, Shepherd said, the cabin residents would have transferred their permits to their youngest children in order to keep control as long as possible.

Some family permit holders are now in their 80s, Shepherd said.

"It was a one-time only chance to transfer the permit to younger people," said Shepherd, now an Oregon resident who visits Mineral King each summer. "Now it's like the grim reaper waits for us."

Shepherd contends that some privately held cabins in the park seem to fall within the Sequoia plan. The Mineral King cabins are on park or public lands.

Peggy Williams, park concessions specialist, said the park's policy is to buy the private holding whenever possible. Officials then return the land to a natural state, which includes removing cabins.

But the argument of the Mineral King permit holders for fairness apparently has found a receptive ear

in Rep. Richard H. Lehman, D-Fresno.

"Maybe at some point in the future, good public policy would require the cabins to be phased out," said Lehman staffer Dan Webb, "but we would like to provide some fairness to these people."